



forest schools

Conference 2007

This summary is bringing together all the comments and proposals made during the group discussions that took place in the course of the conference.

It integrates views from many participants from all over the country and therefore it inevitably might appear in places to be conflicting. However we need to consider and represent all the views expressed on the day to begin to resolve what the conference was actually about: Quality Assurance for Forest School.

It also reveals how passionate people involved in Forest School are and that they have strong convictions.

The summary has been divided in five parts, as seen in the content below. These divisions have come naturally from the content of the notes taken during the conference discussion groups. They have been created to make it more readable, however all divisions are closely connected.

Content:

- 1. Definition of Forest School**
- 2. Quality of provision and of delivery (Indicators)**
- 3. Rationale for an Association**
- 4. Standardisation**
- 5. Other issues arising**

➤ **Definition of Forest School**

The general consensus of the conference attendees is that we need to devise a definition for the term: Forest School.

The conference did not propose a definition, however it was determined that certain elements need to be incorporated or taken into account.

There are some questions, which people felt need answering and there are some characteristics, which seemed to be shared by all. They are listed below and could be a starting point to define Forest School.

It was clear from the notes that we are talking about an ethos, a philosophy rather than just a physical description.

A need was felt for a mission statement.

Questions:

- What constitute a Forest School (site): how many trees make a forest; one/two, more? Generally people agreed that the issue here is due to the fact that Forest School as a term is a misnomer and can be conducted on a natural site, which is not pure woodland.
- Who owns the idea of "Forest School"?

Characteristics:

There is a clear distinction between Forest School and going outside.

Forest School is unique: a) as the kind of outdoor experience it provides

b) in its methodology and structure.

c) it is experiential

Forest School is: a philosophy, a pedagogy and a practice. It provides a natural way of learning with high levels of engagement.

It relates to health and well-being: physical and emotional.

It is mixed skilled based:

- emotional
- practical
- social

It therefore requires mixed skills from the practitioner.

Discovery and the Wow factor are at the heart of learning.

The Wow is important for both the student and the practitioner.

Forest School practice requires flexibility since it is tailored to the need of the children.

It is also a long-term process.

➤ **Indicators: Quality of Provision and of Delivery**

Quality of Provision:

There are some core principles, which are balanced carefully with individuality and independence. They are steeped in a pedagogy, which is child-centred and flexible.

Forest School practice :

- Has trained staff (qualification ensuring quality of provision)
- Is life-long learning
- Has the child's interest at its heart
- Involves creative thinking
- Has continuity
- Is based on responsibilities and clear boundaries
- Must retain the Wow factor
- Offers opportunities for collective reflection
- Promotes parental and community involvement

The sessions need a clear start and finish. The whole experience is a journey from start to the end.

Quality of Delivery:

The role of the practitioner is central to the success of Forest School sessions. As mentioned previously, the practitioner needs a mix of skills to provide for emotional, social and practical requirements.

As referred to in previous sections, the practitioner is seen as someone who needs to balance core principles with individuality and who also is self-reflective.

Some elements of the role of the practitioner were identified:

- Planning (with children involved in it)
- Implementing
- Observing (providing a child profile)
- Continual assessment - targets
- Providing reflective practice (children involved in reviews too)
- Planning for contingencies
- Linking with teachers
- Role-modelling
- Coordinating PSE and Language, promoting natural peer communication

All of this with an understanding of Individualised Learning and ensuring that there are opportunities to re-visit and reinforce learning.

There were concerns expressed that practitioners' emotional relationships needed to be addressed. Practitioners also felt the need for CPD.

➤ **Rationale for an Association**

In the notes and comments, there was a clear division between the why, the how and the what. This explains the groupings below.

Why an Association:

This was addressed on different levels: the bigger picture and the benefits to individual Forest Schools and FS practitioners.

a) The bigger picture:

This would allow for a representation, a clear voice, advocacy for Forest School.

The main benefits that people highlighted in having an association were:

- **A common front and link between practitioners**
- **A forum for collaboration**
- **A strategic role**
- **Lobbying function**
- **A regional and national link**
- **A base to provide consolidation across the country**
- **A base to provide a mission statement**
- **A base to provide industry standards: provision of the very best**
- **A base for reviewing government strategies; looking at becoming statutory within the curriculum**
- **Dissemination of the message to all Local Authorities**
- **A part of the movement for sustainability**
- **A forum to deal with the legislation which affects what FS practitioners do**
- **Link with other related agencies eg ROSPA**
- **Coordination of dissemination**

b) Benefits to individual organisations and individual practitioners

Practitioners want to retain independence without suffering from isolation.

An association would create a forum for:

- **Networking and support**
- **Dissemination and sharing of good practice**
- **Advice and clarity**
- **The provision of CPD; giving access to training**
- **Research**

It could also provide:

- **Legal support**
- **Insurance packages**
- **Pro-formas eg for risk assessment (people felt there was no need to reinvent the wheel for each group or individual)**
- **Discounts**
- **Opportunities to visit centres of good practice**

Practitioners wanted to make the difference between an association rather than an affiliation (eg the Welsh model), although some people voiced a preference for a networking format rather than a national body mainly because of the commitment required by the formation of a national body.

How would it happen? There is a need to establish a model

Ripple effect of passionate individuals influencing others right up to government

The difficulty is that everybody wants it but it is difficult to be pro-active. Time and effort need to be proportionate to the outcome.

There is a need to decide who we are and how wide the net goes as well as who is going to be pro-active.

Is it going to happen bottom up?

The organisation needs to be accessible: conditions of membership need to be established.

There were suggestions of:

- **Representatives: all practitioners to have representation**
- **Layers of responsibilities**
- **A project to feed in information**

Different models were suggested and/or used as examples.

a) Use an existing model such as:

-Wales: Partnership with the involvement of FEI. It has a Board of Trustees, has charity status and part-time coordinators

-Scotland: Cluster groups

-Birmingham FEO: two-tiers: a Strategic group and Ground level groups sharing good practice and acting as support with a cross over but capitalising on individuality. Provision of a web site

b) On-line office with on line mapping of practitioners, of members and of FS activities to enable plotting what is happening

c) An independent association incorporating all the benefits mentioned above.

d) A splinter group within another national body. The example being proffered was as a Special Interest Group within the Institute of Outdoor Learning (IOL). This was proposed on the basis that IOL have been fighting to promote Outdoor Learning for a long time and it would make sense to join them rather than have a separate fight. IOL are receptive.

Forest School is an important element of Outdoor Learning and would fit naturally within that organisation.

Being part of IOL would have a number of advantages:

- **Manageable as a Special Interest Group**
- **As an existing, recognised and influential organisation it would be adding weight to the FS case**
- **Would deal with administration**
- **Would offer other advantages and packages to members**
- **Has an existing CPD provision and accreditation procedure**

What would be involved?

An association would embody the philosophy, pedagogy and practice of FS.

It would be a body that would provide advice and support to practitioners.

It would provide a focus for cross-departmental networking such as with health and education. It would also give weight and influence to lobby government about Outdoor experiences.

It would be a channel to introduce quality 'badging'.

There were expressions of interest in the provision of:

- **Free training for volunteers with the establishment of reciprocal agreements**
- **Training accessible for potential leaders**
- **A survey of the differing ways in which people access working outdoors**
- **A list of members**

Some of the concerns expressed were:

- **That there is actual involvement rather than just subscription**
- **That such an organisation would be good at local level but more difficult to wield nationally**

➤ Standardisation

People at the conference felt strongly that there is a need for standardisation across the industry but that it has to be done very carefully to preserve the diversity of approaches and the individuality, which are intrinsic to Forest School now and which are valued.

Is it a coordinated approach that we are looking at?

It certainly needs clarity.

The discussions focussed around certain elements.

a) Programme core:

The question arising here is who from?

Does it come from the trainers' own belief in what they do?

Is it a question of interpretation?

It brings straight away the dilemma of core principle and individuality.

However can they not be complementary? They need not be incompatible.

b) Benchmarks:

They would measure competency skills

Risk assessment

As for the programme core, the question of who sets the benchmarks arose but also how rigorous they would be. It would require parity between assessors.

It would link with the quality 'badging' mentioned earlier

Indeed is there a standard qualification?

c)Qualification:

- **The first question is does qualification make a practitioner?**
- **Generally people think that qualification ensures quality of provision**
- **Where does level 3 fit within the National Framework?**
- **Where do we go past level 3?**
- **Prior learning and knowledge is not taken into account prior to the training**
- **Is it possible to be only a level 2?**
- **Health and safety ask for training not assessment when investigating**
- **There is a need to incorporate the standards for teacher training**
- **Dissemination could happen through Higher Education**
- **There is a need for CPD**
- **Funding issues lead to lack of training**
- **There is a difference between qualification and accreditation**
- **Accreditation should be taken more seriously since it demonstrate personal commitment**

Other issues arising

These issues were voiced but did not particularly fit within the configuration of the rest of the report. However they need to be represented as well as the views assembled in the main body of the report and they are therefore listed below.

- **Are we in danger of losing awe and wonder?**
- **We need to look at the ratio between risk, support and accident**
- **Will scale affect quality of support?**
- **What is the sustainability of an association particularly regarding its funding?**
- **Resources might be siphoned off from current practice**
- **Danger of privatisation**
- **FEI remit much larger than Forest School which can become a hindrance to FS purpose (issues were mentioned about charging for use of woodland)**
- **Funding is available but the goal post moves and grants move beyond accessibility**
- **Why do we need to take qualifications further when good practice is occurring**
- **Where do we draw the line**